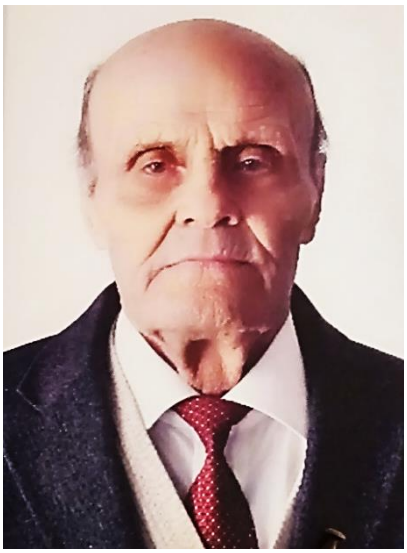
The Ethnographic Collection „Sergiu Popescu" from Zătreni, Vâlcea



The commune of Zătreni is located in the picturesque valley of the Olteț River, in the southwest of Vâlcea County. This is my birthplace, where I spent my childhood and attended primary school. It is a region that was once very prosperous, home to a state agricultural farm, a cooperative farm (CAP), an agricultural enterprise (IAS), livestock farms for cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry, orchards, vineyards, vast cereal fields, and forested hills flanking the valley on either side.

However, the locality also boasts a rich history, reflected in its wooden churches, a castle, the first rural vocational school in the country, a terracotta factory, a branch of the popular bank, a courthouse, a medical dispensary, and more.

This permanent ethnographic exhibition houses approximately 5,000 artifacts. An extraordinary man from Zătreni, The Teacher Sergiu Popescu, revived the ethnographic heritage of the locality. Crafts, customs, and traditions have endured for centuries. With a deep love for his people, he collected and curated these traditions in a permanent village ethnographic exhibition. A native of the village, The Teacher Popescu, unfortunately, passed away a little after his eightieth birthday.

The Teacher Popescu had considerable experience in this field, having worked for over 15 years at the Vâlcea County Museum and several years at the County Directorate for Culture. With the approval of the mayor and the local council, the building of the old school, where generations of students were educated, was transformed into a cultural center. This facility includes a remarkable village library, while the remaining classrooms were dedicated to the current ethnographic exhibition, named the "Sergiu Popescu Ethnographic Collection."

The collection was assembled between 1973 and 2000.

The Teacher Popescu stated: "*By preserving these testimonies that speak of our people's civilization throughout history, I have sought to pay homage to the folk artisans who created these artistic values, which were essential to our ancestors' daily lives*."

The artifacts, gathered with great effort, are displayed in four classrooms, arranged according to a specific layout designed by the art collector.

Officially, the "Zătreni Cultural Center" was established on March 15, 2017, and encompasses various cultural and educational elements within Zătreni, including this permanent ethnographic exhibition and a modern library.

In the school's main hall, showcases exhibit ceramic household items used by Romanian peasants: plates, bowls, mugs,

various-sized pots, and water pitchers. The decoration of these objects was not stylized as it is today. In the past, patterns were simple and hand-drawn, rather than produced with modern techniques.

Other rooms contain wooden artifacts from peasant households: Cuza's measuring jug, double-measuring jugs, spoons, flasks, distaffs, spindles, spinning wheels, loom components, weaving shuttles, flax and hemp processing tools, a grape-crushing vat, a wine decanting vessel, and more.

Additionally, the exhibition includes wooden and ceramic artifacts crafted by local artisans and passed down through generations. These include stave butter churns, carved wooden churns, ladles, small barrels, wooden taps, tubs, pails, a sieve for collecting țuică (Romanian plum brandy), and a wooden water bottle used for carrying water to the fields.

In 1905, a financial society was established by the local landowner or boyar Popescu Zătreni, who later founded a terracotta factory—the only one approved in a rural area at that time—thanks to the region’s high-quality clay. The dyes used on the terracotta were natural. The museum displays several terracotta medallions in green, gray, and brown. Since local residents could not afford terracotta stoves, these products were first purchased by the medieval Buicescu Manor (also known as the Zătreni Castle), the Popescu Zătreni Manor, the Buna Vestire Church in Craiova, and even the Peleș Castle in Sinaia and the Dinamo Club in Bucharest.

The exhibition also features portraits of historical figures from the locality. The traditional folk costume of Vâlcea is remarkable for its diverse colors and popular geometric and floral motifs.

In the room dedicated to folk costumes and peasant attire, visitors can also see the loom used to produce fabric for the national costume. All the folk costumes on display are over fifty years old. Elderly women traditionally wore dark-colored costumes, while younger women wore multicolored garments.

To inspire the current generation, I the writer initiated a national contest, "Zătreni, Pages of Legend," supported by the local government. By 2024, seven editions of the contest had taken place, and the authors' works were compiled annually into an anthology of the same name, reaching six volumes in 2024. This initiative

rediscovered the history, myths, and legends of the locality.

Moreover, in 2018, to the delight of The Teacher Sergiu Popescu, the Mayor, and the residents, I arranged for TVR1 TV channel to feature this museum in a documentary created by journalist Adela Eftimie and her film crew.

„On August 10, 2024, during Zătreni Commune Day, the Gib Mihăescu League of Romanian Writers (Vâlcea branch), represented by President Ion Nălbitoru, in partnership with the Zătreni Municipality, led by Mayor Constantin Lițoiu, and the Rusidava Cultural Association from Drăgășani, headed by poet Marian Bărăscu, organized an exceptional cultural event in this scenic region of the Olteț Valley.

Cultural figures from across the county gathered at 3 pm in front of the town hall at the Heroes' Monument. Here, Ion Nălbitoru introduced the guests to the mayor and vice versa, before proceeding with the scheduled program. The group visited the wooden church within the complex, where they were welcomed by Churchman Mihail Gherghina of the Zătreni parish, who provided insights into the 268-year-old church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist.

The visit continued to the Zătreni Cula, also known as the Castle of Zătreni, considered the only medieval castle in the county." (Cristina Nălbitoru)

Writers and journalists then entered the Cultural Center building, where they explored the Sergiu Popescu Ethnographic Exhibition. This was followed by a symposium discussing the history and beauty of this locality.

Professor Marin Lițoiu, also from Zătreni and the brother of Mayor Constantin Lițoiu, is currently settled in Toronto and is a member of the Canadian Academy of Engineering. He is married to the talented writer Milena Munteanu.

Florentin Smarandache spent his childhood vacations at his grandparents' house in Zătreni and later became a university professor and PhD at the University of New Mexico, USA.

During my travels across Romania, I have encountered village museums, many of them painstakingly established by local villagers, supported by municipalities and local councils, though often receiving little state assistance.

Honor is due to those who, through their efforts, have preserved such cultural treasures for a future increasingly marked by globalization and the gradual loss of Romanian identity. Let us hope that the younger generation, shaped by artificial intelligence, will also cast their gaze toward the past to learn about the customs, traditions, ethnography, and folklore of the Romanian People, of the grand-parents and of the great parents who used to live in these wonderful lands and preserve them with reverence for eternity.

Ion NĂLBITORU – Member of the Union of Professional Journalists of Romania (UZPR) and the League of Romanian Writers (LSR)